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Written statement* submitted by Palestinian Return Centre Ltd, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[24 January 2018]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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The Relief Performance of UNRWA in light of the Syrian Crisis and the consequences of the funding shortage

Introduction:

The Palestinian refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic and those refugees that have been displaced from it are living in extremely difficult humanitarian conditions, amid a sharp decline in the relief and humanitarian work, which were provided by the active relief organizations in this field in general, and UNRWA, the international organization assigned to deal with the Palestinian refugees in particular.

The Palestinian refugees in Syria are being subjected to serious violations, which UNRWA highlighted on several occasions. In one of its statements, UNRWA said that: "The Palestinian refugees in Syria are being killed, injured and displaced in numbers greater than ever before, at a time where armed fighting continues to baffle the refugee camps all over the country."1 According to the Action Group for Palestinians of Syria's Monitoring and Documentation Team, 3629 Palestinian refugees have died due to the fighting in Syria in the time period between March 2011 and December 2017. 475 of those have died because of torture in the Syrian government prisons and detention centers, while 1644 have forcibly disappeared.

Refugees' Census and Distribution

Before the Syrian war, UNRWA estimated the number of Palestinian refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic at 530,000. Approximately 80% of the refugees lived in Damascus, while the majority of the refugees living in other areas of the country, live inside and around the camps close to the great cities of Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Lattakia and Deraa.
UNRWA stated that approximately 270,000 Palestinian refugees have been internally displaced in Syria. Almost 47,000 Palestinian refugees are living in the areas affected by the war and in locations difficult to reach. 2 About 31,000 refugees have fled to Lebanon and another 18,000 moved to Jordan.
Estimated statistics reveal that about 85,000 have migrated to Europe, 6,000 to Egypt, 8,000 to Turkey and 1,000 Palestinian Syrians are in Gaza.

UNRWA and the Syrian Crisis

UNRWA began its work in the Syrian Arab Republic in mid-1950, providing its services in the medical, educational and relief fields, in coordination with the Syrian Government and through the General Authority for Palestinian Arab Refugees, which is affiliated to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor. This is in accordance with the legal basis governing its relationship with the host countries.
The United Nations General Assembly had announced in its declaration number 302 (D-4), on December 8th, 1949, the establishment of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, without prejudice to the provisions of paragraph 11 of the General Assembly's resolution number 194 (D-3) published on December 11th, 1948 3, on the need for continued relief assistance to the Palestinian refugees and the prevention of famine and destitution among them.

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1 United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), on Tuesday, 30 April 2013.

2 https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/2017_aor_arabic_final.pdf

3 Page 7 Declaration No. 194 Paragraph 11: "It has been decided that the return of refugees wishing to go back to their homes and live in peace with their neighbors, should be allowed as soon as possible. Compensations must be paid for the property of those who decide not to return to their homes and for every missing or affected person, in cases where in accordance with the principles of law, it is necessary to compensate for that loss or damage by the responsible Governments or authorities. It demands the Conciliation Commission to facilitate the repatriation and resettlement of refugees, and rehabilitate them economically and socially, as well as paying their compensations and maintaining

In addition to providing calm and stable conditions, and working as a dedicated and temporary agency, with a renewal of its mandate every three years, until a just solution to the Palestinian issue is found. UNRWA differs from its international institutions counterparts, since 94% of its funds come from sponsors and 4% come from the United Nations' regular budget. 4

UNRWA's Relief Response to the Syrian Crisis towards the Palestinian Refugees from Syria

During the period before the Syrian crisis, UNRWA provided its relief services according to an emergency system, not based on a fixed and ongoing program in the medical and educational services. Its work was limited to some emergency cases. However, amid the Syrian crisis, UNRWA provides US$ 70 as cash assistance to each displaced Palestinian or refugee in the Syrian Arab Republic, every two months, in addition to the assistance which is given only after the personal verification of the beneficiaries, under very difficult conditions in some areas, that it describes as dangerous, under the pretext of being unable to send its assistance there, and asking the refugees to get to the areas of distribution.

In Lebanon, UNRWA distributed a monthly allowance of US$ 27 per person for food baskets, which amounts to less than US$ 1 per day. An additional US$ 100 was given as a shelter allowance, for the eligible refugee families, meaning a sum of US$ 235 was given to the family made of 5 members in an inconsistent matter, causing the refugees to feel socially unsafe and constantly looking for other ways to guarantee their daily expenses. In some cases, children and women have been pushed in to the labor market, in conditions that lack the minimum safety requirements and at low wages, within a legal environment that prevents them from exercising any work on a regular basis.

In Jordan, the Palestinian refugees coming from Syria are suffering from the lack of security and the danger of being forcibly displaced back to Syria. Children under the age of 18 make up 41% of the general Palestinian refugee population estimated at 18,000 refugees. UNRWA provides cash assistance of US$ 40 per person, every month.
As for the Palestinian refugees from Syria who are living in the regions categorized as outside the work of UNRWA, the agency has not intervened as it should, to demand providing them with essential assistance, under the pretext that they are outside the limits of its mandate.The responsibility has been given to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which deprived thousands of refugees their owed protection.

Background Information

- 95% of the Palestinian refugees in Syria who are registered with UNRWA, are dependent on its assistance to stay alive. UNRWA is considered their main source of income, after the foundations of the Palestinian society and its economy collapsed, and the unemployed refugees became very miserable. 5
- The percentage of unemployment in Syria during 2017, has reached 78%. Approximately 9 million Syrians are jobless. 6
- The value of the Syrian Pound has fallen more than 90%, currently amounting to 540 pounds against the dollar, after it was about 50 pounds to the dollar before the revolution. The salaries of the employees in the areas controlled by the Syrian Government range between 30 – 40 dollars, which do not cover their basic needs

close contact with the United Nations Relief Director for Palestine Refugees, and through him the appropriate bodies and specialized agencies of the United Nations."

4 https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/sg_report_arabic.pdf
The United Nation's General Assembly - Seventy-first session Agenda item 49 United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. Operations of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East - Report of the Secretary-General Page 4

5 UNRWA's report entitled "Annual Work Report 2015" https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/2017_aor_arabic_final.pdf

6The Fluctuations of the Syrian Economy and its Prospects 31/12/2017 - Solafa Jabbour, Damascus http://www.aljazeera.net/news/ebusiness/2017/12/31/2017 -

due to the significant rise in prices. The prices of the primary commodities in the areas besieged by the government have increased by 4000%. 7

- 93% of the Palestinian refugees displaced from Syrian Arab Republic to Lebanon are very dependent on UNRWA for a wide range of regular and humanitarian assistance, including food, shelter, health care and education.
- 83% of the Palestinian refugees displaced from Syrian Arab Republic to Jordan are weak or very weak, due to the lack of legal status resulting from the government's policy not to allow entrance to Palestinian refugees.
- The average weekly income of the different Palestinian refugees families displaced from Syrian Arab Republic to Jordan is equivalent to 22 Jordanian Dinars only. (31 US$). 8
- The Palestinian refugees from Syrian Arab Republic to Jordan are denied access to the humanitarian assistance provided to other refugees from Syria.
- The Palestinian refugees in Syrian Arab Republic and the refugees from it are facing a protection crisis more than ever before, while the conflict continues to push the residents to flee, especially outside the country. In the Syrian Arab Republic, some of the Palestinian refugee families are subjected to a group of protection threats, while the needs for protection are aggravating for the Palestinian refugees from Syria in Lebanon and Jordan, because they are denied legal status.
- The assistance provided by UNRWA at the relief, health and educational levels, did not meet the required level needed to cover the size of the crises affecting the society. As a result, UNRWA's policy of cutbacks has come under intense criticism and overwhelming protests from refugees in more than one place.

The Risks of Reducing UNRWA's funding to the Community of Palestinian refugees in Syria

The societies of the Palestinian refugees in Syrian Arab Republic and those who resorted to it, are suffering from fragility at the legal, humanitarian and economic levels. In the light of previous information, of which UNRWA is the majority of sources, and the regular and permanent contributions from UNRWA and other relief institutions, the magnitude of the vulnerability and the loss of protection suffered by these communities becomes clear. This also indicates that the substantial funding cuts by the United States of America, will have a significant impact on the daily lives of millions of Palestinian refugees 9 Based on UNRWA's Commissioner-General's expression, this will also affect the regional security conditions at a time when there are many dangers and threats in the Middle East, particularly with the threat of increased extremism. 10

On the other hand, any further cuts in aid will lead to more suffering among more than 5.5 million Palestinian refugees and threaten their future, especially under the calls and pressures exerted by the Israeli occupation to resolve UNRWA.

Recommendations

- The establishment of UNRWA was linked to Resolution 194, which calls for the repatriation of refugees to their homes and therefore UNRWA's work must continue, and it must perform its humanitarian duties towards the refugees until this decision is implemented. An amendment should be revised by the United Nations before being applied, since UNRWA is one of the UN's branches.
- The international community is responsible for the emergence of the Palestinian refugee issue, thus has political, legal and moral obligations to resolve this issue, on the basis of the right of refugees to return to their homes.

7 How is the Syrian Economy going, after 6 years of Revolution? Manaf Qoman - Non-Post http://www.noonpost.org/content/17348

8UNRWA's report entitled "Annual Work Report 2015" https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/2017_aor_arabic_final.pdf

9 https://www.unrwa.org/ar/donate

10 Statement by the Commissioner-General of UNRWA, Pierre Krähenbühl. 17/1/2018.

- Urge donor countries to fulfill their obligations to UNRWA and provide the support needed in order for it to continue its work, to commensurate with the growing plight of the Palestinian refugees.
- Exerting international pressure to resist the calls to dissolve UNRWA in preparation to further deteriorate the Palestinian refugee issue.
- Providing the necessary support to improve the services provided by UNRWA to the Palestinian refugees in view of the significant income that UNRWA is making in order to meet their growing needs in light of the limited and declining relief income.
- Develop the means, tools and authorities of UNRWA to include areas of distribution of Palestinian refugees outside its areas of operation, and to work towards providing physical and legal protection, to ensure the life and dignity of Palestinian refugees.